

**Testimony of Chairman Willie A. Sharp,
Blackfeet Tribal Business Council**

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Good morning Senators, Representatives, fellow Tribal Leaders and members of the audience. My name is Willie A. Sharp, Chairman of the Blackfeet Tribal Business Council. I am here to speak in regard to the potential devastating effects that the decrease of approximately \$1³7 million¹²⁷ of the Department of Public Health and Human Services Budget will have upon the lives of nearly 13,000 people residing on the Blackfeet Reservation as well as the more than 60,000 Native Americans within the State of Montana.

As you deliberate how best to balance the DPHHS budget for upcoming 2012 and 2013 fiscal years, please keep at the forefront of your considerations, the existing downtrodden realities and impoverished living conditions of the Native American people. The majority of our people who live below the poverty line are of the 69% unemployed on the Blackfeet Reservation and are not thinking about republican or democratic agendas. They are simply trying to survive the current day to day harsh difficulties they endure.

The funding that so far has been cut is vital to nearly 1,000 Blackfeet WIC Clients consisting of children at risk for malnourishment and High Risk Infants who rely on this program for special infant formula to thrive and become healthy. These infants are already fighting for their lives so they do not become a statistic of the disproportionately higher rate of infant mortality in a Native community.

In the coldest months of the year when seasonal construction and wildland fire fighting jobs disappear and the plains of the Blackfeet Reservation freeze, the unemployed and many families with a median income of only \$23,000, rely on critical LIHEAP heating assistance. This program assists in keeping the vulnerable elders and 2,500 needy families warm through the severe winter months. They are struggling to pay their home energy bills and may live in unsafe homes and become at risk for serious injury or illness if funding is decreased.

Basic Services on the reservations are very vulnerable. Slashing the DPHHS budget for critical health and human services will create further hardship on an already strained Native American Economy. The harsh effects due to high unemployment rates, poor health care and inadequate

16,700
Total.

housing for families living at or beneath the poverty level income will become amplified. Our communities depend upon these resources that are currently at a shortfall. The Blackfeet Reservation economy, which has never been strong, has been hit hard by the economic slump similar to other struggling Tribal economies in Montana.

Medicaid and the Healthy Montana Kids program provide much needed basic health care to nearly 25,000 eligible Native Americans in Montana. When the current health status of the Native American population is examined and compared to that of the general population, significant health disparities become very apparent among Native Americans such as; higher infant mortality rates, higher teen pregnancy rates, lower prenatal care before second trimester rates, lower cervical and breast cancer screening and treatment rates due to limited access to health facilities and physicians, a higher prevalence of diabetes, diabetes related complications and cardiovascular disease. Cutting funding to the critical healthcare programs will intensify these threats.

Reducing funding to programs like WIC, TANF, Medicaid, Healthy Montana Kids, and LIHEAP will create detrimental effects across the board in Indian Country on families, children and the elderly. Instead, we must strive to maintain these basic human services to ensure they obtain the resources they need and depend on in these hard times by restoring funding to the DPHHS budget. Thank you for this opportunity to testify before you today on behalf of the people of the Blackfeet Nation who are struggling to survive in the current economic crisis.